

# Fightback

*Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism*



## IDEOLOGY

when bad ideas happen to good people

Issue 45



Quarterly magazine published by Fightback

ISSN: 1177-074, Vol. 8, No. 4, Issue 45

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## Subscriptions:

\$60 (AU/NZ) print

\$20 (AU/NZ) PDF/EPUB

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# Editorial

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Serious question: why do this magazine and our website exist?

The reason that *Fightback* exists – like any other “small-circulation” outlet of analysis and criticism – is that its creators believe that their ideas and arguments can help the wider struggle for freedom and equality. Marxism as a project is based on the notion of “class consciousness” – that the prime reason why the working people of the world have not yet done away with capitalist oppression is because the vast majority still accept the ideas of “bourgeois ideology” which justify that oppression. The project that Rosa Luxemburg described as “bringing workers and science together” assumes that we need not only a mass democratic movement, but one where the masses of ordinary people gain the knowledge and skills necessary to make good decisions and plans for their communities and for the planet.

But what happens when the masses *prefer* bourgeois ideology, or other, even worse ideas – and are actively hostile to hearing alternatives? What happens when “bad ideas happen to good people”?

This question has vexed socialists ever since the revolutionary wave of 100 years ago petered out. In the year of Hitler’s victory, radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich argued in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* that German communists lost out to the Nazis because they were trying to make rational arguments to the masses, while the Nazi appeal to prejudice, resentment, and the irrational proved more powerful in practice: “Thus, when the economic crisis was most acute, the mysticism of National Socialism defeated the economic theories of Socialism.”

All this is becoming ever more relevant in the current global crisis, of not only COVID-19 but the rise of a new type of fascist organizing, based on the use of social media to build cultish communities around fear and disinformation. The articles we bring together in this issue all deal with this issue from various angles.

Byron Clark looks at some of the successful ways in which the authoritarian and populist Right have built an audience in recent years, and discusses some possible practical counter-measures. Ani White takes issue with the idea that the dominance of such ideologies is inevitable in the social media era, or even the internet era, and discusses what an independent Left platform might look like in these times. Bronwen Beechey’s update on the New Zealand government’s response to COVID-19 points out the ways in which an overall successful health response has been blinded by neoliberal ideology to the way in which it has left Māori and working-class people to take the brunt of the damage. Daphne Lawless reviews a short book on science communication – published before the COVID-19 era – and asks whether science communication and socialist ideological work share not only goals, but appropriate strategies.

One topic we unfortunately didn’t have the resources to properly analyse in this issue is the relation between COVID-science denial and the Red-Brown phenomenon (the spread of ideas sympathetic to the authoritarian Right within Left circles) with which *Fightback* has extensively dealt. It does not seem to be a coincidence that outlets that have been most prominent in trying to paint cheerleading for “anti-Western” dictatorships, contempt for democracy or even genocide denial as “Left-wing” (such as the podcaster Jimmy Dore or *The Grayzone* website) are now promoting vaccine “skepticism” and quack cures. As we have been saying since 2016, the path between a simplistic anti-liberal “Leftism” and authoritarian anti-rationalism is well trodden, in its myriad forms, and sadly very few seem to come back from it. As Daphne Lawless suggests in her review, it may be too late to save people from the “rabbit hole”; but at least we can start to build a fence around it.

*The Fightback editorial board apologises for the delayed appearance of this issue.*









# Countering far-right ideology

By BYRON CLARK

The growth of far-right ideology over the past decade has been undeniable. The rise of populist leaders like Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Hungary's Viktor Orbán has been accompanied by the rise of hatred and misinformation online, not just on fringe websites but on social media platforms operated by some of the world's biggest companies.

American sociologist Jessie Daniels has described the rise of the alt-right as "both a continuation of a centuries-old dimension of racism in the U.S. and part of an emerging media ecosystem powered by algorithms."<sup>1</sup> This is also the case for Australia and New Zealand, both of which were outposts of an empire that believed in the superiority of the white race to the indigenous people whose lands they colonised, and whose governments maintained policies to exclude non-white immigrants for most of the twentieth century.

In the two decades since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the US, Islamophobia has been stoked by negative depictions of Muslims in both news media and entertainment (think of shows like *24* and *Homeland*). In 2009 the Canadian conservative commentator and best-selling author Mark Steyn published *Lights Out: Islam, Free Speech and the Twilight of the West*, in which he claimed that Muslims have no investment in the western societies where they live, and that Muslims in Europe were abusing welfare programmes and having more children than the native population. In 2011 the French writer Renaud Camus published *Le Grande Remplacement* ("The Great Replacement"), claiming that a global elite is colluding against the white population of Europe to replace them with non-European peoples, specifically Muslims.

<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1536504218766547>



Fears of a Muslim other have stoked the rise of populist parties on the continent during a global refugee crisis, where desperate people try and reach Europe for asylum and are met by militarised borders and detention centres. The man who murdered 51 Muslim worshipers at two mosques in New Zealand prepared for his terrorist outrage by penning a manifesto that shares its name with Camus' book.

Systemic white supremacy did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany – its most genocidal implementation – but following the Second World War, overtly fascist ideas were denied a platform in mainstream media. Of course, the bar for what constituted overtly fascist ideas was high, as shown by some of the examples above.

Social media has, however, provided the far-right with an audience for their ideas that was much larger and wider than the little they could get through older media formats. The Royal Commission report into the Christchurch shooting noted that the perpetrator was influenced by content creators on YouTube, some of whom he donated money to.

YouTube has been often associated with far right content and radicalisation. There has been much debate about the way YouTube's recommendation system works. One theory is that this system drove users to ever more extreme material into what is sometimes said to be a 'rabbit-hole'. An alternative theory is that the way in which YouTube operates facilitates and has monetised the production of videos that attract viewers and the widespread availability of videos supporting far right ideas reflects the demand for such videos. What is clear, however, is that videos supporting far right ideas have been very common on YouTube.<sup>2</sup>

While a number of far-right YouTube personalities have been deplatformed from the service, the problem has not gone away.

A working paper released in November 2021 by the Disinformation Project noted:

In the last month, we have observed more content which connects events in Aotearoa New Zealand with the Q conspiracy, and with far-right conspiratorial narratives more generally. These include white supremacist, incel or extreme misogyny, Islamophobia and anti-migrant sentiment, and anti-Semitism. We have also observed increasing levels of anti-Māori racism.

Much has been written about how the far-right were able to use not just the internet, but

specifically the language of the online world in order to grow a movement. This cultural phenomenon appears to have outmoded the far-left. Is it the case, as the oft-repeated alt-right slogan states, that "the left can't meme"?

## An age of spectacle

"This is an aesthetic century. In history, there are ages of reason and ages of spectacle, and it's important to know which you're in," states Natalie Wynn in one of her video essays. "Our America, our internet, is not ancient Athens—it's Rome. And your problem is you think you're in the forum, when you're really in the circus."

Wynn was described by *Vice* as "seemingly doing the impossible, making nuanced and controversial political debates both sexy and engaging."<sup>3</sup> With 1.5 million subscribers, Wynn is the most popular of the content creators in Left-wing YouTube, or what has been called 'Breadtube' (after Peter Kropotkin's anarchist classic *The Conquest of Bread*). Many creators reject that label as one coined by fans, which is either too broad or too narrow to describe their work. Nonetheless, it's a useful way to describe a new political and artistic movement.

Wynn and her contemporaries have found that in the era of disinformation and fake news, correct information has to be communicated in a way that is not only informative but also entertaining, that will stand out in the torrent of content algorithmically pushed on to viewers.

There will always be a place for deplatforming. Increased scrutiny on social media (YouTube in particular), has caused several of the most prominent far-right personalities to lose their platform. The union that has formed at Alphabet, YouTube's parent company, has criticised the company for its role in the growth of the far-right; a free-speech absolutist position on fascist speech is one that would compel workers to be required to build and maintain platforms for fascists.

But deplatforming now can only be part of the solution to this problem. Far-right narratives like the great replacement and the Qanon conspiracy are part of the global conversation happening online. Fact-checking alone is not enough. Three centuries ago, the Anglo-Irish satirist Jonathan Swift wrote "Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had

2 <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/the-report/part-2-context/harmful-behaviours-right-wing-extremism-and-radicalisation/>

3 <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/06/interview-natalie-wynn-of-contrapoints>



its effect". Jess Berentson-Shaw, whose book *A Matter of Fact: Talking Truth in a Post-Truth World* is reviewed in this issue of *Fightback*, has suggested that more effective than debunking misinformation after it has spread is the tactic of "prebunking"; exposing people to correct information before they are exposed to the falsehood.

## Origins of the modern far-right

The 2000s were an era where the left had something of a cultural dominance, if not any real power. The global movement against the invasion and occupation of Iraq was accompanied by the growth of liberal political comedy, and fervently anti-war popular music that was yet more radical. Conservatism, while keeping its hands on the levers of actual power, was far from cool.

Around this time the young men in newly emerging online subcultures that would later converge into the alt-right at first did not identify themselves as right-wing, instead sneering at earnest belief in anything. Targets of their ire were not chosen for their left-wing positions as such but because they were "social justice warriors" or later "the regressive left" – people who supposedly opposed near-universally held liberal values such as free expression, and were attempting to force others to adhere to their worldview.

As late as 2014 this was the charge levied by the "Gamergate" movement against the likes of feminist film and video game critic Anita Sarkeesian. Gamergate argued that feminists were trying to ban video games – or worse, use video games as a medium to promote a feminist worldview. The Gamergaters rejected the label of right-wing, often pointing to a psychological study of the campaign that found participants "tend to hold more liberal attitudes than the general population."<sup>4</sup>

It was only when this movement was courted by *Breitbart* Editor Steve Bannon that participants began to describe themselves as being part of the "alternative right", which was not so much a euphemism for the far-right, but a term distancing themselves from both the "social justice warriors" of the contemporary left, and deeply uncool George W. Bush-style conservatives.

"I realized Milo could connect with these kids right away," Bannon told Joshua Green, author of *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency*.<sup>5</sup> Milo is Milo Yiannopoulos, the tech blogger hired by Bannon to write pro-Gamergate articles for *Breitbart*, who later toured American university campuses speaking on topics such as how "feminism is cancer".

"You can activate that army." Bannon told Green "They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump."

Bannon would go on to lead Trump's presidential campaign, before being demoted due to Trump's frustration at the popular notion that Bannon was the one really running things. Bannon was described on the cover of *Time* as "The Great Manipulator", a phrase that would have pleased a man who has attempted to insert his voice into populist movements the world over. "Without the supportive voice of *Breitbart* London, I'm not sure we would have had a Brexit," former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage told Green, describing Bannon as "a remarkable bloke".

Bannon's tendrils have even reached as far as New Zealand. "You're at the forefront," he told former National Party MP Jami-Lee Ross, at the time a candidate for the conspiratorial Advance New Zealand Party as he was making a guest appearance on Bannon's *War Room* podcast. "New Zealand, they're the canary in the mineshaft, we've gotta pay attention to what's going on in New Zealand and Australia, 'cause if we don't back our allies there, we don't back patriots in those countries it's gonna come – I mean it's already here, but it's going to come here with a bigger vengeance".<sup>6</sup>

Bannon described Ross as a hero and noted that he is the first elected official to join with the New Federal State of China, an anti-Communist Party of China group started by Bannon and dissident Chinese Billionaire Miles Guo. The pair also run the media organisation GTV, which is infamous for spreading misinformation about election fraud, COVID-19 and other topics.<sup>7</sup> GTV provides a platform for the New Zealand based fake news talk show *Counterspin Media*.<sup>8</sup>

"The winds of cultural politics are changing," wrote Yiannopoulos in an article titled 'How Trump Can Win' published on *Breitbart* a full year before the election where he would do just that.<sup>9</sup>

4 Ferguson, C. J., & Glasgow, B. (2021). Who are GamerGate? A descriptive study of individuals involved in the GamerGate controversy. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 10(2), 243–247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000280>

5 Green, Joshua, 'Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency' Penguin Books, 2017

6 <https://listen.warroom.org/e/ep-434-pandemic-trial-by-fire-w-michael-matt-jamie-lee-ross-and-maureen-bannon/>

7 <https://graphika.com/reports/ants-in-a-web/>

8 <https://www.webworm.co/p/fakenews2>

9 <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2015/10/14/how-donald-trump-can-win-with-guns-cars-tech-visas-ethanol-and-4chan/>



As Big Government advances, it begins to encroach on an increasing number of subcultures, who will look to anti-establishment Republicans like Trump to represent them... Gamers and pop culture enthusiasts are one such group. In the past, it was conservatives who were seen as the dour stick-in-the-muds of cultural politics. They were the ones who tried to censor rap lyrics and video games due to their allegedly 'harmful effects' on society. Today, it's left-wingers and feminists leading the charge.

It was during the highpoint of Yiannopoulos' university tour that Jordan Peterson, previously an obscure University of Toronto psychology professor, uploaded a video to YouTube stating that he would not address students by their preferred pronouns, criticising a Canadian bill, C-16, that he claimed (incorrectly) would render his refusing to do so illegal. Comparing the clip to videos of earlier altercations on campuses, Dale Beran, in his book *It Came From Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office*, wrote: "Once again, a lone white professor was surrounded by a young, diverse group of students. The students screamed and yelled at Peterson, who always kept his cool, for something that, at least on the surface, seemed insignificant."<sup>10</sup>

Peterson would become a significant public intellectual for the crowd of angry young men on the internet with the publication of a self-help book based on a post he made on Quora, described by Beran as "a Reddit-style site infamous for being a place where literal-minded computer programmers go for basic life advice".

Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* is not just a self-help book by a man who also holds reactionary views, but a self-help book with an inherently reactionary worldview woven throughout. Peterson juxtaposes "masculine" order with "feminine" chaos and insinuates that there is no structural oppression, only an "ever-present dominance hierarchy" of which the aim is to reach the top. It's no huge leap for young men reading this, or watching his lectures online, to then gravitate to far-right individuals with explanations as to why those at the top of the supposed dominance hierarchy tend to be white men. These are individuals such as Stefan Molyneux, whose now removed YouTube channel promoted discredited race science (and attracted a donation from the Christchurch shooter).

While the students who screamed and yelled at Peterson for his refusal to do something that is a near-effortless courtesy to trans and gender diverse students were correct in their arguments, and entirely justified to be offended, they were also participating in the circus that Natalie Wynn described.

When Wynn, who herself is transgender, made a video on Peterson, it opens with her flirting with a masked mannequin representing him, sitting him down in her bathroom so he can watch her bathe. This is how Katherine Cross described that video in her article on Wynn in *The Verge*:

what parses as light-hearted jocularly or inexplicable sexual attraction at first quickly resolves into a virtual pantsing. It's a prologue to an elegant crash course in the history of postmodernism and why Peterson's obscurantism makes him difficult to argue with. Calling Jordan Peterson "daddy" and portraying him as a robot lovingly watching Wynn bathe doesn't ennoble him; it erodes him.<sup>11</sup>

While we shouldn't downplay the very real threat posed by the far-right toward marginalised groups, as they attempt to normalise their ideology through irreverent mockery and meming, using the same tactic to counter them appears to be having an impact.

Of course, the tactic is not exactly the same. To quote Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil, Breadtube "stays clear of the trolling and vulgar jouissance that is characteristic of the alt-right"<sup>12</sup> and focuses more on being informative and entertaining. Citing a 2010 article by Peter Marcuse analysing the Tea Party movement (an American conservative movement that arguably was one of the tributaries of the alt-right). Kuznetsov and Ismangil note Marcuse's argument that there is a need for what they term "critical theory in everyday life – a critical theory from below" and argue that role is being fulfilled by Breadtube, which they suggest could even be laying the necessary groundwork for a socialist movement. That part may be wishful thinking, but there is evidence to suggest Breadtube is reaching the people it needs to. Social media has no shortage of anecdotes from individuals who credit the movement with pulling them away from the alt-right.<sup>13</sup> Each of these stories is a small victory, and perhaps, in the aggregate, they point to the possibility of a much larger one.

10 Beran, Dale 'It Came From Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office', All Points Books, 2019

11 <https://www.theverge.com/tech/2018/8/24/17689090/contrapoints-youtube-natalie-wynn>

12 Kuznetsov, Dmitry & Ismangil, Milan. (2020). YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought. tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society. 18. 204-218. 10.31269/tripleC.v18i1.1128.

13 <https://theconversation.com/meet-breadtube-the-youtube-activists-trying-to-beat-the-far-right-at-their-own-game-156125>







# Is the internet the problem?

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By ANI WHITE, doctoral candidate in Media and Communication

The utopian moment of the internet seems dead. Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, various negative features of the internet-as-we-know-it have become apparent: surveillance, the commodification of social life, algorithmic bubbles, 'Fake News' and conspiracy theories, and the far right's effective use of the internet for recruitment. Faced with algorithmic capitalism fostering increasingly toxic content, we may be reminded of Professor Farnsworth's words from *Futurama*: "Technology isn't intrinsically good or evil. It's how it's used. Like the Death Ray."

Yet utopian accounts persist, emphasising decentralisation, post-scarcity, new sharing and collaborative practices, and replacement of labour offering the possibility of a post-work society: socialists such as Paul Mason and Nick Srnicek have argued that the internet prefigures 'post-capitalism', although the contradictions of 'platform capitalism' must be resolved to get there.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of this article is not to advance a purely utopian or dystopian account of the internet, but rather to enquire into the broader social relations the internet reveals.

In this historical moment, the social relations revealed by the internet *do* appear largely dysfunctional. Yet this may not be determined by the internet. A cross-national psychological study found that while the internet does not necessarily make people more hostile – people who are hostile offline tend to be hostile online – the behaviour of hostile people is more visible online than offline.<sup>15</sup>

A similar principle may apply with misinformation and backlash: this is not a problem that originates with the internet, but the internet certainly provides a platform for it. The contemporary backlash against vaccination has precedent: mandatory seatbelts,<sup>16</sup> mandatory helmets (which were ruled by the Illinois Supreme Court as an unconstitutional restriction of personal liberty),<sup>17</sup> and drink-driving laws<sup>18</sup> all received a backlash when introduced. In the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the far right took advantage of the popular media channels of the time – such as the printing press, posters, and cinema (such as the work of Leni Riefenstahl) – to propagate conspiracy theories and far-right ideology. Contemporary anti-Semitic memes in particular bear remarkable resemblances to this 'classical' anti-Semitic propaganda, in large part because memers directly borrow from it.

Yet internet platforms have distinct features that reward certain kinds of content over others. Algorithms often reward negative content. Anti-capitalist gaming commentator Jim Sterling, who has achieved some success with 850K followers on YouTube, notes that they are often criticised for only producing negative content, yet their negative content receives the most engagement. Sterling comparatively cites the viewing and engagement figures of their own videos to demonstrate this, with more positive videos receiving less engagement.<sup>19</sup> Facebook's algorithms, ranking 'reaction' emojis such as the angry face as five times more valuable than 'likes', also seem to have factored into the growth of negative content.<sup>20</sup>

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14 Mason, Paul. *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*. Allen Lane. 2015; Srnicek, Nick. *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. Verso. 2015

15 Bor, Alexander; Petersen, Michael Bang. "The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis." *American Political Science Review*, First View, pp. 1 – 18.

16 Ackerman, Daniel. "Before face masks, Americans went to war against seat belts." 27 May 2020, *Business Insider Australia* (<https://tinyurl.com/mandatory-seatbelts>). Web. Accessed 12/21/2021

17 Jones, Marian Moser; Bayer, Ronald. "Paternalism & Its Discontents: Motorcycle Helmet Laws, Libertarian Values, and Public Health." *Am J Public Health*. 2007 February; 97(2): 208–217.

18 Lerner, Barron H. "How Americans Learned to Condemn Drunk Driving." *What It Means To Be American* (Smithsonian and Arizona State University), 17 January 2019 (<https://tinyurl.com/drinkdriving-backlash>). Web. Accessed 21/12/2021

19 Sterling, Jim. "Mister Negative (The Jimquisition)." 31 March 2020, YouTube (<https://tinyurl.com/sterling-negative>). Web. Accessed 21/12/2021

20 Merrill, Jeremy B; Oremus, Will. "Five points for anger, one for a 'like': How Facebook's formula fostered rage and misinformation." 26 October 2021, *The Washington Post* ([tinyurl.com/fb-angry](https://tinyurl.com/fb-angry)). Web. Accessed 12/21/2021

Communist theorist Jodi Dean argues that “the net is not a public sphere”, meaning that it does not serve as a space for rational deliberation and debate. Yet Dean does not bemoan that the net falls short as a “public sphere.” Rather, Dean defines the net as a new “zero institution”, an unavoidable bottom line for all contemporary politics, one which favours contestation over consensus, and argues that political activists should engage on these terms of contestation rather than attempt to turn the web into a rational public sphere.<sup>21</sup> It’s worth noting that the “public sphere” has involved exclusions from the start – the French Revolution, idealised by theorists such as Jurgen Habermas as the birth of modern public discourse,<sup>22</sup> excluded everyone but property-owning European men. Therefore, contention has always been necessary to expand public discourse.<sup>23</sup> Media and Communications theorists Kavada and Poell have recently argued that rather than deliberative national public spheres, the context for contemporary social movements is one of transnational “contentious publicness.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet contentious publicness is often weaponised by the right, particularly the far right. As outlined in Gavan Titley’s essential *Is Free Speech Racist?*, the far right has proven adept at casting reactionary views as a ‘free speech’ issue, by provoking ritualistic clashes over the ‘right to offend’ that give legitimacy to long-discredited ideas such as race-science.<sup>25</sup> In general, the far right has proven very adept at using the affordances of the internet to propagate its ideology. If nothing else this is demonstrated by the widespread adoption of far-right talking points, such as ‘free speech’ for racists, across the political spectrum: even many professed leftists buy into this framing.

So, in this toxic ideological environment, are we now reduced to pro-government fact-checkers? Fact-checking may be necessary to a point, but it relies on a common agreement about what sources are authoritative, among other related issues. Fact-checking can even be counterproductive, as seen with the *backfire effect*, where people presented with facts that contradict their views not only reject these facts, but may even defensively strengthen their existing beliefs.

For example, a study examining parents’ intent to vaccinate their children found that when presented with facts that contradicted their views, anti-vax parents sometimes become *more likely* to believe in a link between vaccination and autism.<sup>26</sup>

As an anecdotal example, I recently circulated a study highlighting that over 4 times as many people are offended by ‘Happy Holidays’ (13%) than ‘Merry Xmas’ (3%).<sup>27</sup> Posting this in two separate places prompted two independent response rants about snowflakes offended by ‘Merry Xmas’, the ideological schema apparently preventing any logical engagement with the facts of the article. This is not simply a matter of irrationality, rather all of us have background schemas that can lead us to confirmation bias, seeking out facts (and ‘facts’) that confirm our schemas while ignoring or denying facts that contradict them. This ideological schema also shapes our views on questions like what kind of sources are reliable, meaning that citing ‘reliable sources’ does not necessarily work.

Not all schemas are equally valid. The very visible online denialism regarding COVID has revealed the prevalence of background schemas such as xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, and consumer entitlement (as shown by harassment of service workers). In an article on “The Reality of Denial and the Denial of Reality”, Antithesi / cognord note the narcissistic individualist ideological schema revealed in denialist reactions to the pandemic:

Contagious diseases differ from other diseases in a very substantial way: they are by definition *social*. They presuppose contact, co-existence, a *community* – even an alienated one. What the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has shown us, however, is that we are in a historical period where social relations are perceived as the *burdensome void* between solid, closed-up and inviolable *individuals*. Individualities that are self-determined, non-negotiable, non-contagious. At this point, it makes little difference whether this predicament gets interpreted as signifying the prevalence of a narcissistic character or that of a (neo)liberal imaginary that mystifies the social character of capitalist relations and the subjects who reproduce them...

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21 Dean, Jodi. “Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere.” *Constellations* 10(1):95 – pp112 · April 2003

22 Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An enquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. MIT Press. 1962.

23 Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990). JStor (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/466240>). Web. Accessed 12/03/2018.

24 Kavada, Anastasia; Poell, Thomas. “From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media.” *Communication Theory* 00, 2020: pp1-19, published by Oxford University Press on behalf of International Communication Association.

25 Titley, Gavan. *Is Free Speech Racist?* Polity Press. 2020

26 Brendan Nyhan et al, *Effective Messages in Vaccine Prevention: A Randomized Trial*, *Pediatrics Journal*, April 2014: <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/133/4/e835/32713/Effective-Messages-in-Vaccine-Promotion-A?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

27 Ingraham, Christopher. “Poll: Conservatives most likely to be offended by holiday greetings.” 20 December 2021, *The Washington Post* (<https://tinyurl.com/offended-conservatives>). Web. Accessed 20/02/2017



Instead of a social movement that would fight as much *against* a management geared to minimise disruption of economic output, as well as *for* universal and unconditional access to existing protective options (from vaccines to remunerated withdrawal from work) and expanded health care, we have the development of tendencies that demand, in the name of “freedom” and self-determination, the right to pretend that Sars-CoV-2 does not exist.<sup>28</sup>

Although we are forced into a defensive rather than proactive position, the apparently contradictory stance of Aotearoa/New Zealand leftists who’ve previously been critical of the Ardern government now defending key policies stems from a broader pro-public health schema. We support vaccination not because the Ardern government is doing it, but because of the historical record of vaccination as a public health measure (and call governments, including the Ardern government to account where their public health response is inadequate).

Conversely, being right is not enough. We must keep in mind Marx’s reminder that “it is essential to educate the educator”;<sup>29</sup> none of us arrived fully formed socialists, and all of us have something to learn. We need to construct educational spaces beyond the academy that can challenge preconceptions, facilitate informed debate, and work towards shared understanding. It may be possible to create such spaces online with careful moderation, but it’s clear that corporate ‘social media’ platforms are not generally geared towards productive discourse, so we need our own educational infrastructure both online and beyond.

Yet to a point, we can appropriate mainstream platforms for our own purposes. This was made apparent by the social movements of 2011, and more recently by the Black Lives Matter movement, with a central slogan that was popularised via hashtag. Just as neo-reactionary movements are not *created* by the internet but promoted through it, many have highlighted that the 2011 movements could not accurately be described as ‘Twitter Revolutions’ or ‘Facebook Revolutions’, as they were neither determined nor even primarily organised through social media. Yet they demonstrated that progressive movements can use mainstream

platforms effectively. The logic of these platforms tends more toward promotion rather than education, so keeping this in mind, we can use them to supplement other forms of communication and organisation. The internet, including mainstream platforms is *necessary but insufficient* for any contemporary communication strategy.

We need our own independent projects that transcend corporate social media platforms. Promotion through mainstream platforms must be complemented by the development of independent online platforms, independent media more generally, and ‘traditional’ forms of organising such as doorknocking, strikes, and mass mobilisation. This is more difficult in a pandemic environment, which has tended to force communication and organisation online, an acceleration of an existing trend that has both pros (such as the reduced barrier of geography) and cons (such as the reduced capacity to take direct action). Yet it’s also possible to mobilise relatively safely in ‘meatspace’, as demonstrated by mass Black Lives Matter rallies which implemented health measures such as masking – there is no evidence that these protests led to increased spread of COVID-19.<sup>30</sup>

The internet is no more the problem than previous media forms such as mass printing, cinema, or television was the problem – and you could certainly find many arguing that they were (such as Guy Debord in “Society of the Spectacle”<sup>31</sup>). Yet leftists were able to utilise media forms such as mass printing: this was the main infrastructure for mediated political communication, as the internet is now. The internet also has affordances that these prior forms did not, such as the greater ease of circulation across the political spectrum. More than purely utopian or dystopian accounts of the internet, we need to identify how social contradictions play out through and beyond digital platforms, and to develop strategies with an awareness of both these platforms’ advantages and limitations. As the post-capitalists argue,<sup>32</sup> we can also seek to construct a different kind of internet, driven not by the self-serving imperatives of Silicon Valley but by sharing and collaborative practices for social ends.

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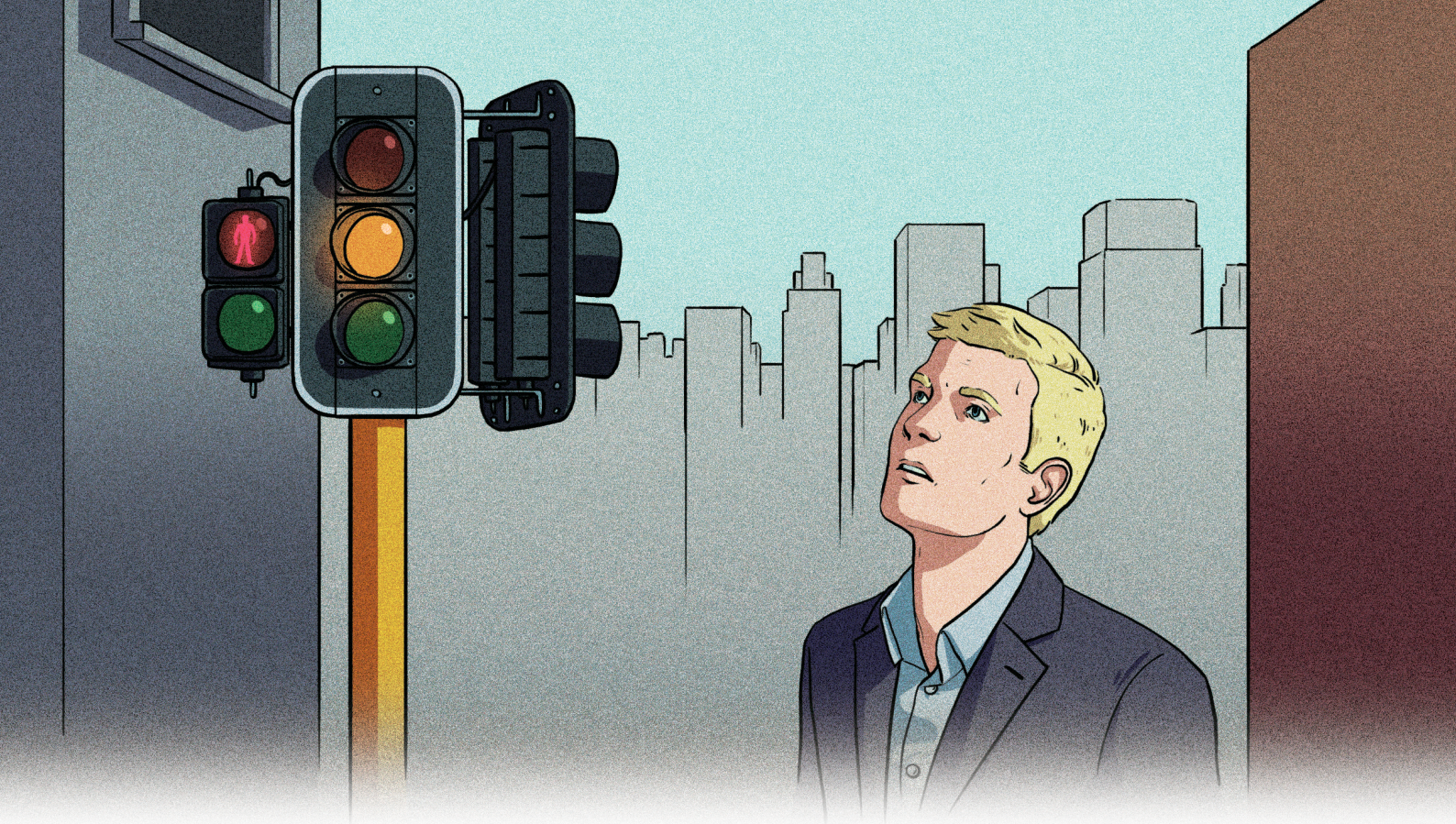
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# The Delta outbreak in Aotearoa: ideology and inequality

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By BRONWEN BEECHEY

In a recent Twitter post, a Canadian law professor expressed his amazement at Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 website ([covid19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz)) for providing detailed and comprehensive information on the virus.<sup>33</sup> In one of the wholesome interactions that sometimes occur on NZ Twitter, he received a response from Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield, thanking him for his comment.

At the time of writing (7 January 2022) Aotearoa New Zealand has a total of 51 deaths due to COVID-19, and 819 active cases with 37 people in hospital. This, compared to the corresponding worldwide figures of around 500 million cases

and nearly 6 million deaths, has drawn similar admiration from many at the NZ government's response to the pandemic. As I commented in a previous article, compared with the government's response in countries such as the USA, Great Britain and Australia, any reasonably competent response would look good.<sup>34</sup> However, the Labour government headed by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern deserves credit for following a policy that relied on science and overall prioritised the health of people over the demands of business. But, rather like the widely-discredited claim that Aotearoa NZ is "clean and green", the reality is that the government's pandemic response is not quite as impressive as it seems.

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33 <https://twitter.com/UbakaOgbogu/status/1478489062042333186>

34 <https://fightback.org.nz/2020/09/08/being-kind-the-ardern-government-and-covid-19/>



## Alert levels and traffic lights

The initial Coronavirus outbreak in 2020 was controlled through a four-stage alert system. “Level 4” was a lockdown with all public facilities and most retail closed, and all but “essential” workers working from home. This approach was successful and by summer things were back to normal, with people able to socialise, travel within the country, attend concerts and return to work. The development of COVID-19 vaccines, which became available in March 2021, increased confidence that Coronavirus could be eliminated or at least confined to Managed Isolation in Quarantine (MIQ) for those entering the country.

However in August, the first case of the Delta variant was detected in the community, and the Government announced a Level 4 lockdown from August 17 for the whole country. The lockdown was accompanied by a ramping up of efforts to encourage vaccination. While the lockdown, and generally widespread take-up of vaccination, undoubtedly prevented widespread deaths and hospitalisation, it proved to be less effective against the more transmittable Delta strain. Eventually the majority of the country was downgraded to lower alert levels, but Auckland, the largest city and the epicentre of the Delta outbreak, remained in lockdown for almost 100 days.

On October 22, Arden announced the government’s new COVID-19 Protection Framework. This replaced the previous Alert Levels with a “traffic light” system centred around vaccine certificates and to be implemented once 90% of the eligible population had received the two vaccinations required to protect against COVID 19. Under the traffic light system, workplaces, schools, public facilities and businesses stay open with capacity limits, but entry to gatherings, hospitality venues and close-proximity businesses such as hairdressers will require a vaccination certificate. Masks are compulsory in most public spaces under “red” and “orange” levels. At “green” there is still COVID-19 in the community, but community transmission is limited and hospitalisations at “manageable” levels.

The government also instituted vaccine mandates in education, health and allied sectors, which have also been taken up by a number of NGO and private employers.

These measures were greeted by predictable howls of outrage from anti-vaxxers and protests which, while smaller and less violent than those in Australia and elsewhere, also showed the right using the issue to pull in anyone who disliked the Labour government, Māori, women in leadership roles, etc. The majority of people did in fact get vaccinated – even if it was just to keep their jobs – and the threat of mass resignations didn’t eventuate.

## Systemic racism

However, response to the new system from those who had supported the government’s approach was divided, with some epidemiologists warning that the health system could be overwhelmed by an explosion in cases. Many saw the move from an “elimination” strategy to a “live with the virus” strategy as a concession to the business sector’s demands for “certainty” and an end to lockdowns.

The decision to move to a traffic light system was also strongly criticised by Māori organisations, who pointed out that an overall target of 90% vaccination ignored the fact that Māori had been lagging behind in vaccination rates, and were already over-represented in COVID-19 statistics. The New Zealand Māori Council lodged a complaint with the Waitangi Tribunal, arguing that the government was leaving Māori more vulnerable to infection, thereby breaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), the agreement signed between representatives of the British Crown and most iwi (tribes) in 1840 and ratified in 1975. The Waitangi Tribunal, in a report released on December 21, agreed. In a letter to Government ministers accompanying the report, panel chair Judge Damian Stone wrote:

As at 13 December 2021, although Māori comprised 15.6 percent of the population, Māori comprised over 50 percent of the Delta cases, 38.6 percent of Delta hospitalisations, and 45 percent of associated deaths. The statistics speak for themselves.

Māori health providers told the tribunal that they were sidelined, ignored and underfunded. The tribunal was also told by experts and officials, including Bloomfield, that they had advised Cabinet of a need to prioritise Māori from the beginning of the vaccine rollout. While the initial rollout targeted people over 65 and those with chronic health conditions, Bloomfield and others argued that Māori over 50 should be included, as Māori die earlier and have more health vulnerabilities than Pākehā (NZ Europeans). However, this was rejected by Cabinet, apparently due to fears of a racist backlash if it was seen to be giving special consideration to Māori.

The tribunal also considered whether the rapid move to the COVID-19 Protection Framework put Māori at increased risk. It agreed that the change in tactic was necessary, given the economic and social impact of lockdowns, but that:

The rapid transition into the framework – which happened faster than the Crown’s officials and experts recommended, and without the original vaccination thresholds for each district health board being met – did not adequately account for Māori health needs.

The tribunal concluded that the government had breached Te Tiriti o Waitangi, in particular the principles of active protection and equity, as well as those of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) and partnership. While the tribunal's decision is not binding on – and was disputed by – the government, it was a political embarrassment for Labour, which has historically branded itself as committed to Māori interests. The government and the Māori Council have set up a new consultative body, but how much difference that will make is uncertain, given the Government's reluctance to give more than lip service to tino rangatiratanga.

The vaccination rate among Māori has improved (currently around 82% fully vaccinated), largely due to increases in funding announced earlier this year, which has enabled Māori health providers to invest in mobile vaccination clinics or do door to door outreach. However, some providers report that they are struggling to recruit enough Māori nurses to administer vaccines.

## Inequality and pandemic

The issue of Māori disadvantage is not just due to racism. It intersects with the other outstanding failure of the government – to address poverty and inequality. While the economy has overall improved, the improvement has not been equally distributed. Some economists refer to the economic recovery as a “K-shaped” recovery, where those with assets (especially property) are doing well, while those without are struggling.<sup>35</sup> This is due to structural inequality that preceded the pandemic, but COVID-19 has made it worse. The housing bubble, which has put owning a home out of reach for most working people, has resulted in a shortage of rental property and a corresponding rise in rents. Calls for the government to do more than tinker around the edges have been ignored. Some amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act which took effect last year have improved the rights of tenants, including restricting the number of times rent can be increased during a tenancy, but there has been no attempt to put a cap on rents. While more public housing is being built, there are still nearly 25,000 on the social housing waitlist.

The housing affordability crisis coupled with the pandemic has caused an increase in homelessness. The latest available figures (for November 2021) show that over 10,000 people were staying in emergency accommodation. Children made up almost half that number. Emergency

accommodation is mainly in motels and meant to only be for a week or two, but many families are staying for six months or more. There are also a large number of people in transitional housing, which is meant to be for up to 12 weeks while residents are supported to find permanent accommodation, but many are staying for longer due to the lack of affordable accommodation. These figures do not include those who are living in cars or staying with relatives. This makes the transmission of COVID-19 more likely. The majority of people affected by housing stress are Māori or Pacific peoples. Many are the “essential workers” who have kept society functioning through lockdowns – health workers, cleaners, supermarket workers and so on.

While most “non-essential” office workers and professionals were able to work from home during lockdowns, those in sectors like hospitality or manufacturing have lost jobs or had their hours reduced. Many of them were unable to access support from Work and Income because they are receiving just enough through wage subsidies to put them over the income limits, but not enough to afford to pay rent or mortgages and buy food. While the government has increased funding to food banks, many are stretched to capacity; and food parcels are not a long-term solution to poverty.

The government has still not acted on the recommendation of its own Welfare Expert Advisory Group in 2019, that benefits be increased to provide a liveable income. An increase of \$20 per week to main benefits in July 2021 was nowhere near enough to cover the increased costs of housing, food and other necessities.

The role of Ardern and the NZ government in responding to COVID-19 with a science-based approach, countering misinformation, and a focus on protecting people's lives over the demands of business deserves praise. However, it is far from being the “transformational” government that it claims to be.

So far, the Omicron variant has been confined to cases from overseas in MIQ, but experts have warned that it is only a matter of time before it begins occurring in the community. Fortunately, booster vaccinations have been made available and vaccination of children aged 5 to 12 is due to begin from 17 January, but the spread could also be reduced by increasing wages and benefits, providing adequate and affordable housing and increasing funding to Māori and Pasifika health providers. However, this would force the Ardern government to take a stand against big business – which seems unlikely.

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35 <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/money/2021/04/explosion-of-wealth-inequality-as-housing-boom-leaves-many-behind-economist.html>



# Bringing workers and science together

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*A Matter of Fact: Talking Truth in a Post-Truth World* by Jess Berentson-Shaw  
(Bridget Williams Books, 2018) <https://www.bwb.co.nz/books/matter-fact>

reviewed by DAPHNE LAWLESS

Reading Jess Berentson-Shaw's *A Matter of Fact: Talking Truth in a Post-Truth World* – published in 2018, before the COVID excrement really hit the fan – is eerie, precisely because so much of what she was talking about three years ago is doubly important to understand now. Those of us who are despairing at the way science denialism has infected our communities, movements and families, and how it leads them slowly but inevitably down the fascist rabbit-hole, should take the opportunity to learn its lessons now.

In this review, I want to discuss how Berentson-Shaw's argument both parallels and adds to the concept of "ideology" as Marxists usually understand it; and consequently, what Berentson-Shaw's approach to communicating science to a mass audience might mean for the whole project of socialist agitation and propaganda, as we understand it.

## Facts and narratives

Jess Berentson-Shaw trained as a public health scientist and describes her agenda as being "how we build public and political support for more inclusive and evidence-based policy" (page 137). Her job, and the project of this book, is to examine why building public support based on evidence and scientific logic faces so many obstacles in a modern media environment. Berentson-Shaw's colleague at communications non-profit The Workshop<sup>36</sup>, Marianne Elliot, puts the problem succinctly in her introduction:

I've spent many years trying to communicate research evidence in ways that move people to action... I was trying to persuade people with facts, despite those facts being in conflict with their previous experiences, and the stories they had constructed to make sense of those experiences. (4–6)

Elliot talks about her experience with trying to promote the concept of a rise in basic benefit levels as the best response to child poverty. But all the evidence and social science in the world wasn't enough to convince people who deeply believed that the needy would simply waste that money on drugs and alcohol. Even people who had grown up in poverty accepted this self-blaming story.

The question of stories – or to put it another way, *narrative* – is crucial for understanding how ideology works:

People process information (facts or data) more accurately, understand it and engage with it better, when it is conveyed through a narrative – whether that be written, told, painted, danced or acted. Story is retained; data less so...

Narratives are not a simpler form of information – rather, they are complex and enduring. They map well to the way in which our brains process information and lay down memory. Narratives may simply be the default mode of human thinking. (91)

Narratives are so resilient because, once established, they effectively filter out information that contradicts them. Narratives are mental models in which:

people build a causal chain of events. If new information seeks to replace a single link in that chain but no other links, then it causes a failure in the mental model. People no longer have a coherent story. It stops making sense, so they reject it. Once a good story is formed, it is very resistant to change because all elements in a good story fit together. (38–9)

More than a decade ago, psychologist Drew Westen noted that "stories always trump statistics, which means the politician with the best stories is going to win", while author Thomas Frank lamented: "It's like a French Revolution in reverse in which the

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36 <https://www.theworkshop.org.nz/>



workers come pouring down the street screaming more power to the aristocracy.”<sup>37</sup> Westen and Frank were referring to the G. W. Bush era, a time which seems gentle and rational in retrospect compared to the full-throated embrace of irrationality of the Trump movement. The sad fact is that the narratives of the reactionary Right were getting more public traction than the neoliberal centre, or the radical left, 10 years ago; since then, matters have gotten much worse.

However, while Berentson-Shaw agrees that “a basic understanding of the science of story is an important skill for anyone dealing with, and talking about, good evidence” (108), it’s not just as simple as some argue, that the liberal establishment are just “bad at messaging”. (It’s probably not a coincidence that the people who say things like this are often “messaging experts” themselves, looking for a job.) The great virtue of Berentson-Shaw’s short book is that it explores, in ways backed up by evidence, the reasons why people become prone to believe misinformation and stories which work against solidarity. It’s not enough to simply repeat Marx’s dictum that “the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas” – we need to explore the process by which this social process takes place.

## Misinformation: supply and demand

In my article on the spread of Red-Brown ideas in the movements in this country and overseas, I was at pains to point out that there was both a “supply and demand” problem with this kind of misinformation.<sup>38</sup> There certainly was and is a very prominent apparatus of government agencies, media outlets and rogue billionaires doing their best to defecate in the meme pool; but all of that could only be effective if it was telling people things they were already happy to believe.

Berentson-Shaw ably discusses both sides of this issue, and points out that there’s nothing new about the rich and powerful sowing disinformation. *The New Zealand Herald* was founded during the settler government’s wars in the Waikato and Taranaki, with a specific agenda (a “red lens”) of depicting Māori as being bloodthirsty savages and a threat to Pākehā colonists, thus justifying wars of confiscation against them (21). Corporate science denial – a set of tools developed originally in the 1960s by tobacco companies, and more recently deployed to prevent significant action against

37 BBC News, 30/01/10, “Why do people vote against their own interests?” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8474611.stm>

38 <https://fightback.org.nz/2018/05/09/the-red-brown-zombie-plague-part-one/>





climate change – is aptly described by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway in *Merchants of Doubt*, and its playbook was being used by anti-vaccination fraudsters such as Andrew Wakefield long before COVID arrived (24-5).

At the heart of misinformation is often power and money, followed up by a human appetite for the shocking or controversial. Misinformation is used to subvert democracy, to sell the cultural stories that maintain people's relative position and power in society, to make money, or because people fear change that truth brings with it. (22)

Media bias and social media algorithms also help to shovel disinformation in front of people's eyes, of course; research has indicated that:

false news was more novel and therefore more sharable... the structure of new media fosters the quick and wide dissemination of misinformation and a resilience to correction. (21, 27)

The Marxist concept of ideology – whereby capitalist ideals of individualism and competition become seen as “natural”, even where they contradict ordinary people's tendencies to solidarity – is recalled where Berentson-Shaw complains about “wider social narratives” discouraging pro-social behaviours:

One of the barriers to people being able to express or act on their pro-social values is when the wider social narrative acts in opposition. It does not make it impossible, but it certainly makes it harder to act on pro-social values, and feeds into a perception that there is a gap between an individual's prosocial values and everyone else's values. (109)

But the other side of the coin with which Berentson-Shaw deals are the psychological factors which make individuals, or communities, liable to resist facts and truth and accept misinformation. It's worth paying particular attention to some of these, because socialist activists or even intellectuals are certainly not immune from these cognitive traps.

The most important thing to remember is that – in contradiction to the “just-so” stories of neoclassical economics – people are not simple rational calculators of their own best interests:

most people incorporate technical and scientific issues quickly into our thinking using mental shortcuts. Rather than rationally weigh the strength of evidence in a scientific claim we analyse it immediately using our values, beliefs and feelings as a guide. Our emotional response is critical to developing the initial impression of validity. (17)

Berentson-Shaw mentions concepts familiar to anyone who's dealt with the questions of how people form their beliefs, such as “cognitive dissonance” and “confirmation bias” (37). But an additional factor that paradoxically helps misinformation to spread is that *we trust our friends* – or, at least, we assume that people with whom we are having a friendly interaction are telling the truth. When alienated people “go down the rabbit hole” and find a supportive community in a conspiracy theory or even a cult, it becomes increasingly hard to re-join the “reality-based community”.

With many options to choose from, people can seek sources that only confirm their existing beliefs and worldviews. Incorrect information is more likely to go unchallenged and echo chambers and ‘cyber ghettos’ are built that create a more polarised public – polarisation being the strengthening of one's original position or attitude, measured by how absolute that position is. (27)

Another factor is for loud minorities to be able to pretend to be majorities, and to build consensus around themselves (something we can see happening in real time with anti-vaxxers and transphobes on social media):

Repetition can become particularly problematic in social media contexts... Pluralistic ignorance is when the frequency and volume of a minority-held belief leads the majority of people, who do not share this belief, to mistakenly believe that it is what most people think... As a consequence, they move to accepting that minority belief out of a desire to fit in... Conversely, this frequency can mean those in the minority believe they hold the majority opinion – the ‘false consensus effect’. (43-4)

Perhaps the most important factor in Berentson-Shaw's account, however, is the role of *values and beliefs* in what kind of narratives people tend to believe:

Where facts and issues become very polarised – for example, genetic modification, climate change, immunisation, gender pay inequities – there tends to be a clear conflict over values and beliefs... What the knowledge-gap literature shows is that people can be aware of, even understand, the evidence, but it may not match what they believe. Or they do not see it sitting well with the values they feel are most important. (28)

To illustrate this, Berentson-Shaw discusses the contrasting values of those who hold anti-vax ideas, and those who accepted the case for anthropogenic climate change. Anti-vaxxers were “much more likely to believe in the conspiracies, highly valued their personal/individual freedom and had strong individualistic values”, while in contrast climate



change believers were “people who prioritised egalitarian and communitarian values”, more likely to “accept restrictions on commerce and industry as a way to mitigate the risks” (30).

There’s a rather cynical saying from the world of small-group socialist politics: *programme generates theory*. That is – far from the conceit of “scientific” socialism that political ideas emerge from study of the facts, evidence, analysis and logic – groups usually decide what they want to do first, then come up with rationalisations and justifications for it. This seems to have similarities to what Berentson-Shaw argues: that beliefs “tend to be contextually dependent and uphold our values” (61), rather than the other way around. You can’t argue someone out of a position that they weren’t argued into.

## Against intellectual elitism

Berentson-Shaw knows from her own experience that having “truth” and “facts” on your side isn’t quite enough when you’re trying to make a public argument:

I also became quite rigid about ‘scientific truth’. That is not unexpected when your job is to find only the best evidence researchers can produce and eviscerate the rest. I did not easily listen to the concerns of others about science, or bend to consider their experience... I considered more the lived experience of others, what they value and why. I understood that my facts might not matter to people, regardless of how true they were. (9)

This is refreshing humility coming from a trained scientist. The progress of the COVID Delta outbreak in Aotearoa New Zealand has tragically shown the limits of “official science” in communicating with marginalised communities – particularly with Māori, who have no reason to trust anything coming out of a colonial state and its intellectual apparatus.<sup>39</sup> Berentson-Shaw understands the problem with the inherent biases of the scientific institutions themselves:

It is well documented that science itself can be biased in regard to who gets to do research, whose issues are researched and what questions are asked and how... In New Zealand, we are coming to see that science is not neutral across ethnicity, race and gender. ...We are working to ensure that indigenous Māori knowledge – *mātauranga Māori* – and European systems of science work in partnership. (32)

It’s not just a matter of getting the information out there – if “the phone is off the hook” (to use a rather outdated metaphor) in the target communities, then the message will not get through:

The information deficit model of communication assumes that we (as purveyors of evidence) simply need to plug a knowledge gap to ensure that people both understand and act... Knowledge is rarely a good predictor of people believing in evidence or acting on it. Research has found that once a range of personal and cultural factors are taken into account, there is actually a very weak and, in some cases, negative relationship between knowledge and attitudes to evidence. (16)

What the knowledge-gap literature shows is that people can be aware of, even understand, the evidence, but it may not match what they believe. Or they do not see it sitting well with the values they feel are most important. (28)

All the most successful lies are based around a kernel of truth, and the kernel of truth upon which fascistic disinformation goes something like this: *the neoliberal corporate and technocratic elite aren’t on the same side as ordinary people, and you can’t trust what they say*. This could almost be mistaken for a dumbed-down version of Marxist analysis of how ideology works under capitalism. The mischief comes with the reason *why* this is supposed to happen. Instead of a materialist discussion of how the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas, the Right-wing populists offer *conspiracy theories*. The effect of these is to build an alliance between the most oppressed and some of their worse oppressors – as “the ordinary people”, bearers of “traditional values” or “common sense” – against a supposed conspiracy of degenerate Others who act out of sheer wickedness, or perhaps allegiance to Satan.

Some argue that the problem is a lack of “critical thinking” skills among the masses. Berentson-Shaw agrees that “putting in place the building blocks of critical thinking when people are young is key” (47). However, she also stresses the factor of sheer overload in the modern mediascape:

The mountain of new information that comes the way of both professionals and the general public, and the presence or absence of the necessary skills to apply to that information, is perhaps less relevant than simply having insufficient mental bandwidth and time to consider it all. (19)

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39 See for example Flo Kerr’s grim article from October: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300440848/covid19-vaccination-how-mistrust-shadows-the-rollout-in-a-time-of-crisis>



It's probably also worth noting that conspiracy theorists *think* they're doing "critical thinking" when what they're doing is reflexively dismissing official sources, while effortlessly swallowing memes they saw on an anonymous Facebook account. Berentson-Shaw distinguishes scepticism, which is real and valuable, from this kind of combination of extreme distrust and extreme gullibility.

## Eerie predictions

Reading this at the peak of New Zealand's COVID Delta outbreak was eerie at times. The parts which are most striking are the sections dealing with vaccine resistance and associated conspiracy theories – which have been a problem long before COVID brought the body count into the millions worldwide. Berentson-Shaw's account of scientific bureaucracies neglecting to deal with the values and beliefs of their audiences, and then wondering why "the facts" are rejected, uncannily predicts exactly the kind of holes in the science communication response which have led to resistance to vaccination and public health measures, particular among alienated Māori, and its exploitation by fascist opportunists such as Brian Tamaki. I almost jumped to see a reference to the work on science communication of Dr Shaun Hendy (107) – who since August has become one of the most prominent modellers of the Delta outbreak in the New Zealand media, and recipient of death threats from the anti-vax mob.<sup>40</sup> It's also chilling to realise that, long before COVID:

In a study of YouTube videos, in which the search terms 'vaccination' and 'immunisation' were used, around half of the videos returned in the search were unfavourable to immunisation and the content of those that were unfavourable to immunisation contradicted the science. (27)

Those who had very unfavourable beliefs about the science of vaccination were much more likely to believe in the conspiracies, highly valued their personal/individual freedom and had strong individualistic values. Education and other individual characteristics relating to people's position in society or experiences did not feature in their attitudes towards vaccination. (30)

Truly, COVID has brought into sharp public relief these issues of disinformation and communication which were the concern only of political obsessives and "ivory tower elites" a couple of years ago; in the same way, it has highlighted the massive disconnection of Māori from not only New Zealand's public health system, but even the sphere

of public debate. Misinformation is a plague as deadly as COVID, and the two reinforce each other as they consume the most marginalised communities.

## What's in it for us?

Berentson-Shaw is writing from the point of view of a science communicator, rather than a political theorist. Once upon a time, Marxism used to pride itself on being "scientific" – Australasian communist author Jean Devanny once gave it the delightful name of "working-class science and philosophy". But whether we see ourselves as scientific or not, we have the goal of communicating ideas and facts that (we believe) will help working people and oppressed communities defend themselves and organise to create a better world. Like science communicators, we are struggling against not only deliberate misinformation spread by governments, corporates and their paid "communications experts"; but against cognitive biases, communication difficulties, and what Berentson-Shaw describes as "the wider social narrative act[ing] in opposition" (109).

Berentson-Shaw is clear about the stakes involved, in terms that socialists would heartily endorse:

If people do not act on good information, if misinformation prevails, if we cannot get traction on big and difficult issues with science and good evidence to guide us, then climate change goes unmitigated, children go unvaccinated, gender inequity persists, negative stereotypes prevent action on racism, poverty is perpetuated. (33–4)

Berentson-Shaw's essential insight for socialists as well as science communicators is that *communication has to go both ways*.

Trust and credibility involves relationship-building. Understanding the extent of that erosion requires that individual researchers, communicators and institutions who have information to convey first listen, attend to, and connect with the experiences of people before they can talk. (33)

The equal and opposite danger to the arrogant scientist (or sectarian activist) lecturing people on what's good for them is the opportunist pundit who tells people what they want to hear:

One way to overcome this kind of unhelpful emotional response, the research shows, is to avoid making threats to people's beliefs. That however has its problems, as to simply avoid challenges to people's beliefs to keep

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40 <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/national/shaun-hendy-siouxie-wiles-file-complaint-against-university-auckland>

people's feelings in a useful zone does not always allow people to see new and more accurate information...

What the values literature adds is that instead of simply avoiding threats to people's beliefs or engaging only with their emotions, if we prioritise helpful values then it is possible to engage emotion constructively. (73)

The goal is therefore to understand the *values* held by a given target audience, and to craft a narrative whereby those positive values are reinforced by the evidence and factual information being provided.

Berentson-Shaw identifies two symmetrical mistakes that communicators can make. One is known by the traditional name of "preaching to the choir":

It is spectacularly easy to fall into the trap of only ever communicating with people who value and believe the same things as you... We call these people 'our base', and communicating directly with them is called 'activating our base'... However, we cannot focus exclusively on the base to develop and deliver messages – we need others to see the evidence. (83)

On the other hand, it's also important not to *overstate* the importance of the "rabbit hole community". A lot of attention has been put on how to get people out of the rabbit hole – similar to great debates on how to "deradicalize" someone who has become a white supremacist or a violent jihadi. To overly concentrate on this group, however, neglects the fact that it is still a tiny minority:

One danger of polarisation to communicators is that it drives them to focus only on the vocal minority – polarised people. The 'silent majority' of bystanders is overlooked and we can end up talking past, over or around the very people we most need to connect with. (28)

The political priority should therefore be "building a fence around the rabbit hole" – preventing more ordinary people from falling in, focusing on that section of the population whom Berentson-Shaw refers to as "the persuadables". (83)

Berentson-Shaw argues that a problematic prevailing myth in current society is "the values perception gap" whereby we imagine that other people are more selfish and less caring than they really are: "we underestimate the care we have for each other, and this prevents collective action on the big social and environmental issues of our time." (78–9) Conversely, "using messages that primarily engage with economic or fear-based arguments as a reason to believe evidence and act has little evidence of impact" (79) – something that activists both in the field of public health and climate change activism might pause to consider.

It seems as if Jess Berentson-Shaw has ended up dealing with the question that Rosa Luxemburg posed more than 100 years ago – of bringing together science and ordinary people (perhaps not "workers", precisely). Her approach is, in the best sense of the term, a *democratic* one; neither elitist nor populist, neither telling the great unwashed what's good for them, nor backing away from challenging bad ideas for fear of unpopularity. She emphasises the need for "public participation", which, she stresses,

...is utterly different from consultation, consultation being a very didactic process with clear power imbalances between people. At their best, public participatory processes are iterative, deliberative processes that bring together research experts with community experts and political experts and give them equal voice... (80)

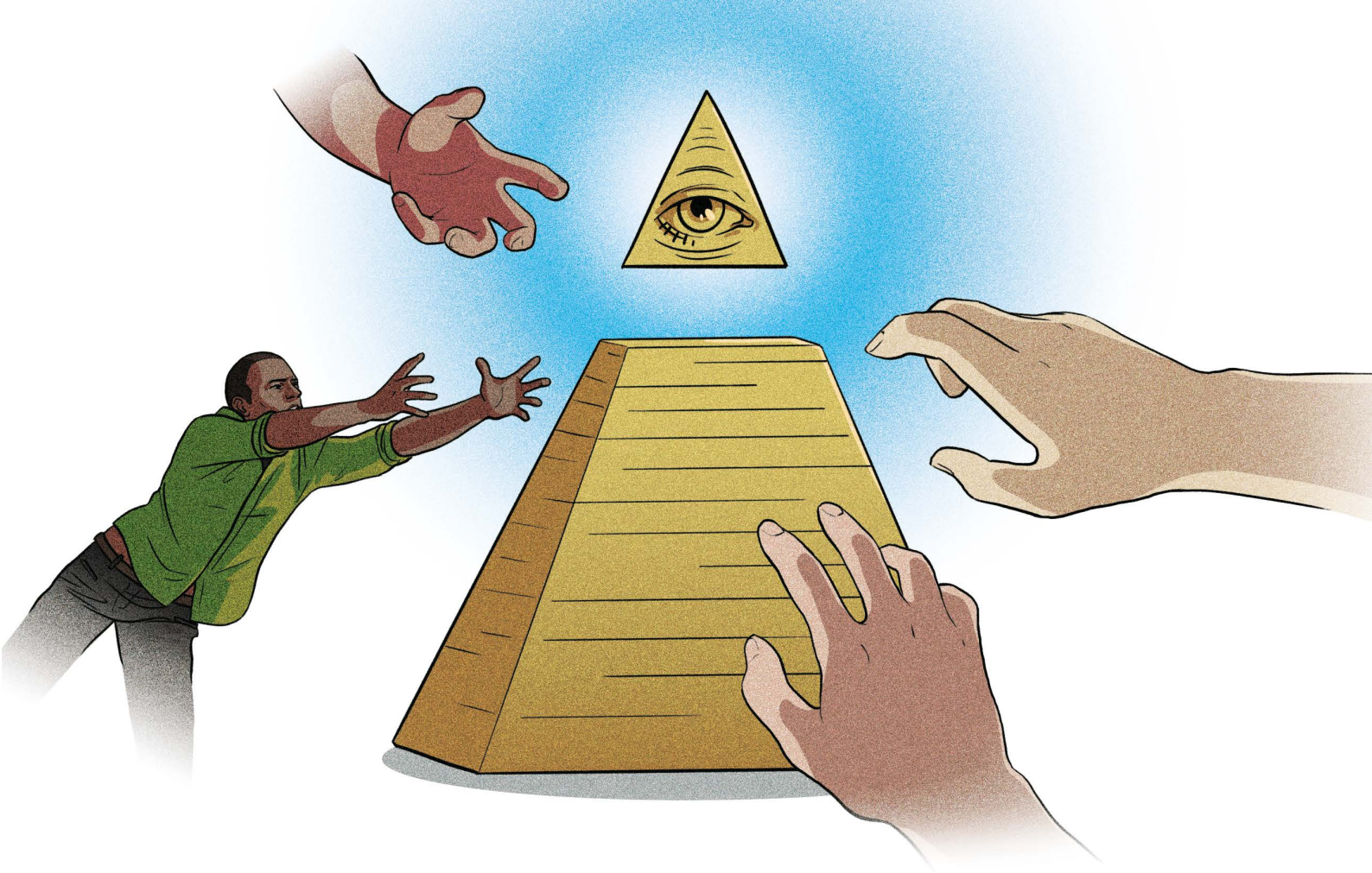
Deliberative processes may help uncover the values involved in the consideration of research and make clear what the public is concerned about. If we plan to engage people's values as part of communicating evidence, then which values specific groups prioritise involves a different sort of work. (82)

It's worth quoting Berentson-Shaw's conclusions in depth, because they seem equally as pertinent to political activists as they are for science communicators:

It is important to first understand the values currently held by those who you most need to connect with and persuade, in order to build a robust approach. Then frame existing ideas about the world ... using cognitive and linguistic techniques and technologies to engage the values that are most helpful. A strong narrative is also needed to work with people's default mental processes for attending to and recalling narrative information, and to convey a whole causal chain of events. To construct a strong narrative we must first understand the existing stories in society. Finally, and most importantly, however, all of this starts with debiasing ourselves as researchers and communicators, finding *technologies of humility* [emphasis added] to listen to and be receptive to others, and so creating a space in which a better transfer of good information is able to occur. (101)

If a socialist might find something lacking in these conclusions, it may be that Berentson-Shaw might be a tad overconfident in the power of good science communication and participatory processes to overrule the basic ideologies of capitalism. We can heartily agree that "psychology has a role in researching and working to diminish 'contemporary culture's focus on consumption, profit, and economic growth' (109–10) – but only alongside and informing a mass democratic movement. That's surely not a job for the science communicators – but perhaps the political activists can learn.





# It's shocking to see so many Left-wingers lured to the far right by conspiracy theories

by GEORGE MONBIOT. Originally published at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/22/leftwingers-far-right-conspiracy-theories-anti-vaxxers-power>

It's an uncomfortable thing to admit, but in the countercultural movements where my sympathies lie, people are dropping like flies. Every few days I hear of another acquaintance who has become seriously ill with Covid, after proudly proclaiming the benefits of "natural immunity", denouncing vaccines and refusing to take the precautions that apply to lesser mortals.

Some have been hospitalised. Within these circles, which have for so long sought to cultivate a good society, there are people actively threatening the lives of others.

It's not just anti-vax beliefs that have been spreading through these movements. On an almost daily basis I see conspiracy theories travelling smoothly from right to left. I hear right-on people

mouthed the claims of white supremacists, apparently in total ignorance of their origins. I encounter hippies who once sought to build communities sharing the memes of extreme individualism. Something has gone badly wrong in parts of the alternative scene.

There has long been an overlap between certain new age and far-right ideas. The Nazis embraced astrology, pagan festivals, organic farming, forest conservation, ecological education and nature worship. They promoted homeopathy and “natural healing”, and tended to resist vaccination. We should be aware of this history, but without indulging what Simon Schama calls the “obscene syllogism”: the idea that because the Nazis promoted new age beliefs, alternative medicine and ecological protection, anyone who does so is a Nazi.

In the 1960s and 70s, European fascists sought to reinvent themselves, using themes developed by revolutionary anarchists. They found fertile ground in parts of the anarcho-primitivist and deep ecology movements, which they tried to steer towards notions of “ethnic separatism” and “indigenous” autonomy.

But much of what we are seeing at the moment is new. A few years ago, dreadlocked hippies spreading QAnon lies and muttering about a conspiracy against Donald Trump would have seemed unthinkable. Today, the old boundaries have broken down, and the most unlikely people have become susceptible to Right-wing extremism.

The anti-vaccine movement is a highly effective channel for the penetration of far-right ideas into Left-wing countercultures. For several years, anti-vax has straddled the green left and the far right. Trump flirted with it, at one point inviting the anti-vaxxer Robert F Kennedy Jr to chair a “commission on vaccination safety and scientific integrity”.

Anti-vax beliefs overlap strongly with a susceptibility to conspiracy theories. This tendency has been reinforced by Facebook algorithms directing vaccine-hesitant people towards far-right conspiracy groups. Ancient links between “wellness” movements and antisemitic paranoia have in some cases been re-established. The notion of the “sovereign body”, untainted by chemical contamination, has begun to fuse with the fear that a shadowy cabal is trying to deprive us of autonomy.

There’s a temptation to overthink this, and we should never discount the role of sheer bloody idiocy. Some anti-vaxxers are now calling themselves “purebloods”, a term that should send a chill through anyone even vaguely acquainted with 20th-century history.

In their defence, however, if they can’t even get Harry Potter right (purebloods is what the bad guys call themselves), we can’t expect them to detect an echo of the Nuremberg laws.

I believe this synthesis of Left-alternative and Right-wing cultures has been accelerated by despondency, confusion and betrayal. After Left-ish political parties fell into line with corporate power, the right seized the language they had abandoned. Steve Bannon and Dominic Cummings brilliantly repurposed the Left-wing themes of resisting elite power and regaining control of our lives. Now there has been an almost perfect language swap. Parties that once belonged on the left talk about security and stability while those on the right talk of liberation and revolt.

But I suspect it also has something to do with the issues we now face. A justified suspicion about the self-interest of big pharma clashes with the need for mass vaccination. The lockdowns and other measures required to prevent Covid-19 spreading are policies which, in other circumstances, would rightly be seen as coercive political control. Curtailing the pandemic, climate breakdown and the collapse of biodiversity means powerful agreements struck between governments – which can be hard to swallow for movements that have long fought multilateral power while emphasising the local and the homespun.

So how do we navigate this? How do we remain true to our countercultural roots while resisting the counterculture of the right? There’s a sound hippy principle that we should strive to apply: balance.

I don’t mean the compromised, submissive doctrine that calls itself centrism, which leads inexorably towards such extreme outcomes as the Iraq war, endless economic growth and ecological disaster. I mean the balance between competing values in which true radicalism is to be found: reason and warmth, empiricism and empathy, liberty and consideration. It is this balance that defends us from both co-option and extremism.

While we might seek simplicity, we need also to recognise that the human body, human society and the natural world are phenomenally complex, and cannot be easily understood. Life is messy. Bodily and spiritual sovereignty are illusions. There is no pure essence; we are all mudbloods.

Enlightenment of any kind is possible only through long and determined engagement with other people’s findings and other people’s ideas. Self-realisation requires constant self-questioning. True freedom emerges from respect for other people.



# About Fightback (Aotearoa/Australasia)

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Fightback is a trans-Tasman socialist media project with a magazine, a website, and other platforms. We believe that a structural analysis is vital in the task of winning a world of equality and plenty for all. Capitalism, our current socio-economic system, is not only exploiting people and planet – but is designed to operate this way. Therefore, we advocate a total break with the current system to be replaced by one designed and run collectively based on principles of freedom, mutual aid, and social need.

Fightback is a trans-Tasman organization, operating in Aotearoa and Australia. In the modern era of free movement across the Tasman, 'Australasia' is becoming a reality in a way it has not been since the 19th century. So many New Zealanders (tauwi as well as tangata whenua) now live and work in Australia – and decisions made in one country increasingly impact the other, as the inter-governmental controversy surrounding the Manus Island detention camp shows.

We wish to engage socialists from both sides of the Tasman – in particular, socialists from Aotearoa living and working in Australia – to continue the lines of analysis and directions of organization which we have been pursuing. Beyond the dogmas of 'sect Marxism'; beyond national boundaries; towards a genuinely decolonised, democratic, feminist and queer-friendly anti-capitalism.

We recognise that capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa and Australia through colonisation. While we draw substantially on European whakapapa and intellectual traditions, we seek to break the unity of the European colonial project, in favour of collective self-determination and partnership between tangata whenua and tauwi. We recognise that this must be a learning process.

While we draw inspiration and lessons from history, theoretical agreement on past revolutions is not the basis for our unity. Rather, we unify around a common programme for transformation here and now.

# Fightback's Points of Unity

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**Economic & Social Justice.** White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy exploits the working majority. We support all movements for redistribution, recognition and representation (as put by socialist feminist Nancy Fraser), from the workplace to the wider community. The average union member in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia is a woman, so the struggle for economic democracy must be intersectional: sacrificing no liberation struggle for the sake of another.

**Transnational Solidarity.** Struggles in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia are interconnected with transnational struggles: to give just one example, refugee rights here are connected with the wars that force people to seek asylum. We stand against racist nationalism and imperialism, and for self-determination everywhere. This transnational solidarity crosses all geopolitical 'camps': neither Washington nor Beijing truly supports self-determination.

**Radical Democracy.** Socialism suffocates without democracy, as the catastrophic failures of the 20th century demonstrate. Radical democracy cannot be purely majoritarian (as this may curtail the rights of minorities), and cannot be guaranteed by states: to quote slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass, power concedes nothing without a demand. Radical democracy is defined by the ongoing fight for self-determination in all sectors of life. We also stand for democracy within the movements, including the need for principled debate.

**Popular Science.** In an era marked by populist fake news from left to right, we seek to 'intellectually vaccinate' the movements against conspiracy theories and pseudo-science. As German socialists Ferdinand Lassalle and Rosa Luxemburg asserted, we must bring workers and science together, rather than locking knowledge away in paywalled journals. Although scientific research doesn't exist outside social context, and isn't the only form of knowledge, it's a necessary check on our assumptions.

**Ecosocialism.** Extractive capital is driving mass extinction. We support investment in sustainable infrastructure: high quality public housing, public transport, and green cities. Landlords, extractive industries, agribusiness and other beneficiaries of the status quo are preventing such sustainable solutions, so power must be taken out of their hands and given to communities.

**Anti-fascism.** Fascism and similar movements claim to be anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist, but instead redirect working people's anger against scapegoat groups or fictitious conspiracies. We fight all tendencies on the Left and Right which scapegoat and demonise the victims of capitalism and imperialism – including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, and the smearing of people fighting oppression as "terrorists". Only solidarity of all oppressed and exploited communities can solve the social problems we face.

**Constitutional Transformation.** Capitalism was established in Australasia through colonisation, and sovereignty was never ceded. As a tau iwi (non-indigenous) based group in Aotearoa/New Zealand and so-called Australia, we support the fight for indigenous-led constitutional transformation. Although we don't yet know exactly what constitutional transformation will look like, it must involve both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, actively engaged in building institutions based on mutual recognition.



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